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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the first phase of a three-part study meant to provide information, in an expanded context, for decisions related to marketing communications at Western Iowa Tech Community College (WITCC). The Marketing Department proposed focus groups to examine dropouts, students who are admitted but do not enroll, and business persons in charge of training (gatekeepers). (For this study, dropouts were defined as students who enrolled in the fall semesters of 1999 or 2000 but were not enrolled the following spring semester.) The first contact was by telephone, describing the project and asking if the potential subjects were interested in participating. Focus groups were scheduled during 3 evenings in March, 2001. Participants were rewarded with a $20 gift certificate from the mall. When each of the more than 20 people indicated they were interested in participating, they were scheduled for 1 of 3 sessions. A follow-up letter reminded them of the time and place and offered further details. Finally, each was given a reminder call within 2 weeks of the session. The participants were nontraditional students in terms of age, career choice, and pattern of enrollment. This report details the qualitative findings of the study, stating that dropouts were nontraditional students whose attitudes toward the college were generally positive. Also included are: a literature review; and the survey instrument. (Contains 17 references.) (Author/NB)

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ED 473 193

Dropping Out at Western Iowa Tech Community College

A report summarizing focus group interviews

March 2001

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Introduction: Project Genesis

The *Dropout Focus Groups* is phase one of a proposed three-part study, undertaken at the request of the Director of Marketing to provide information, an expanded context, for decisions related to marketing communications. Concurrently, the college Retention Committee identified a need for similar information. Marketing proposed focus groups with three target groups: dropouts, students who are admitted but do not enroll, and business persons in charge of training (gatekeepers). The Retention Committee expressed an interest in activities directed at improving the retention rate for the college and specific populations within the total student demographic.

Definition

The definitions of a 'retained' student and a student who 'drops out' are not mutually exclusive; a student may fall into both categories. Thus retention is contextual to an institution and to its enrollment timeframes. It may be

a) Within-Term—students who were enrolled in and completed the semester.
b) Between-Term—students enrolled in one or more classes in one semester and who enrolled in one or more classes during the next semester (Fall-Spring). Fall-to-Fall—students who were enrolled in the fall semester who enrolled in a subsequent fall semester. Four-year colleges normally report Fall-to-Fall Retention Rates.

For this study, 'Dropouts' were defined as students who were enrolled in the Fall Semesters of 1999 or 2000 but were not enrolled the following spring semester.

Research Literature & Design

Retention is a complex issue that is situation specific, with connotatively acquired meaning, especially for community colleges.

In retention literature, related topics include at-risk students, 'dropouts' and 'stopouts,' persistence, and degree attainment. Studies focus on very narrow variables and often expand to complex models for holistic notions that include individual change and developmental factors. Within that broader context, much has been written on the subject of persistence and degree-attainment of college students. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, p. 387) found that "the volume of literature directly or indirectly addressing this area of inquiry during the last twenty years is extensive to the point of being unmanageable."

Interaction theory dominates the current research on retention, reflecting a dynamic, interactive view of student experience where leaving reflects an individual's experience with both the formal and the informal organization of the institution. The standard for interaction theory is Tinto's Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975, 1987 and 1993). It is characterized by the view that student departure is a consequence of the interaction between the individual student and the college as an organization. It consequently offers the attractive possibility of effective interventions to ameliorate withdrawal rates. Empirical evidence indicates "partial support for the main elements in Tinto's model" (Braxton et al., 1997).

Ruddock et al. (1999) argued that a major limitation of the interactional theory for community colleges is its failure to account for the impact of formal organizational or external forces (e.g., external communities) upon student participation. Thus current

forms of interactional theory are neither particularly well suited to the study of non-residential institutions and/or of departure among commuting students, nor easily adapted to the practical needs of administrative planners.

As the faces of entering students continue to mature—shift towards older, part-time, minority, and commuter groups, we have been urged to conduct studies that are specific to our institutions. A major consideration is that most research has been conducted on traditional student populations--which are becoming increasingly scarce at many institutions--and because each institution offers a particular "take" on the college life.

Clearly, various factors are related to student retention (See Appendix D). Although a great deal of research has been conducted to examine these factors that influence the student decision, much of the published research is quantitative, with few researchers reporting the perspective of students who leave. *The tendency, then, is to use institutional data for examining students' demographic characteristics, their financial backgrounds, and their college academic performances. However, institutional data, absent of students' direct feedback, give few guidelines regarding how to mount successful retention effort.*

It is essential for colleges to understand the perspective of *their* students who leave prematurely. For this study, qualitative data collected from focus groups with 'dropouts' were analyzed and categorized into themes. The interview protocol (Appendix A) was structured around a series of questions designed to learn about positive and negative aspects of their experience with the college. The focus group method satisfies the exploratory intent of this research, offers the potential of providing focus for and complementing quantitative data collection methods.

The Present Research

The purpose of this first phase was to bring together individuals who appeared to fit into a dropout category. The focus group format offered an opportunity to observe the interaction as one person's comments or observations stimulate reaction or perception among other participants (Morgan, 1997). The issue of sensitivity toward the research topic created some tension between participants to the extent that most were uncomfortable making negative comments about the college even though asked to express "Dislikes." Though negative comments are reported here, and though the content of those comments should be heeded, several participants explicitly stated that they had nothing negative to offer. Further, all participants expressed support and appreciation for the college, and even the most critical participant commended the college for asking for input.

Protocol. The focus groups were structured around a series of 10 questions suggested by the Marketing Director, allowing for a flexible interview schedule (Attachment A). My purpose was to semi-structure the discussions around particular aspects of student experience with the college and with their career/life goals.

Specifically, I wanted my participants to describe their goals at the time of last enrollment, experiences in class and in the enrollment process, their decision to not re-enroll, their background information (about job, job satisfaction, future goals), indicators or satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the college, suggestions for change, potential for returning to the college. A more structured format would have presupposed too much of

what the participants might say and not allow them to express themselves in their own terms.

Data Collection.

To garner enough participants for three separate focus groups (Morgan, 1997), participants contacted were randomly selected from 643 former students who had been enrolled in the Fall 1999 or the Fall 2000 but not the following Spring. The first contact was by telephone to describe the project and to learn if the potentials were interested in participating. The focus groups were scheduled during the evenings of March 6, 7 and 9, 2001, with each session beginning at 6 p.m. at the Mall Campus. Participants were induced/rewarded with a $20 gift certificate from the mall, and when each of the 20+ persons indicated a willingness to participate, they were scheduled for one of the three sessions.

They were reminded of the schedule and place in a letter that further confirmed the details. Finally, each was given a reminder call within two days of the scheduled session.

Table 1. BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS (n=14)

	Number
Age	
Range	22-65+
Average	38
Race/Ethnicity	
White*	13
Hispanic	1
* Based on student records & observation.	
Year of First Term	
1995	1
1996	2
1997	1
1998	2
1999	5
2000	1
Unknown	2
Occupational Area	
Banking	2
Health	2
Transportation	1
Part-time or Temporary	2
Service	2
Social Work	1
Management	2
Marital Status	
Married	6
Single	6
Unknown	2
Gender	
Female	8
Male	4

The research team for this project included college staff responsible for planning and institutional research, coincidentally merging the disciplines of sociology and education. I facilitated the groups.

Data Analysis. The interviews (90 minutes to 2 hours) were audio-taped, the tapes were transcribed by an independent contractor. After preliminary analysis, the data were coded using Nonnumerical Unstructured Data: Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing (NUD*IST), a software package for analysis of qualitative data.

The preliminary analysis was inductive, with categories and themes emerging through several readings of the transcripts and from the interview protocol (Appendix A). Initially the transcriptions were read and re-read to identify and index themes and categories that center on particular phrases. I initially identified a core of approximately ten themes by analyzing and coding each sentence (my unit of analysis).

Educational Background

Participant	Degree(s) held	Goal	Employment
1.	AA Electronics WITCC BA + SMU Community College Courses	None	Self-employed
2.	AA Banking WITCC BA Westmar	None	Disability advocate, semi retired
3.	EMT-2 Cert. WITCC	Paramedic AA	EMT, hospital
4.	BA, Morningside	AAS	Midstep
5.	NONE	AA	Counselor
6.	NONE	AA intermediate BA Design	Dental Office
7.	CERT. WITCC	AA	Semi-Driver, short term
8.	Unknown	AA	Middle manager
9.	Some college	Unknown Computer Certifications	Manager
10.	CERT. EMT	AA & BA	HHO representative rural
11.	NONE	AA	Bank Compliance Officer
12.	DIPLOMA WITCC	AA	Office work
13.	NONE	AA BA Briar Cliff	Banking
14.	UNKNOWN	NONE	Social Service Work

The participants in this focus group projects were nontraditional students from the perspective of their ages, choice of career, and patterns of enrollment. From their comments, it appears that all except one completed the semesters during which they were enrolled. At the time of enrollment, a majority expressed an intention to graduate.

Though all indicated general satisfaction with their current job and life status, they were still in the process of looking for additional skills and additional education. They were employed in a variety of positions, including service type work, bank officer, semi-truck driver, office work; several worked in the medical field, several in management, and one in a family business.

On the other hand, all but one (or two) would consider taking classes again at WITCC, if they can fit it into their schedule, if the like the faculty teaching a class, or if they can afford it. In a few instances they made conscious decisions to enroll at WITCC because of qualities associated with other colleges that did not suite them. For example, one enrolled in a class at a local college that was too large, full of male athletes. Most often, the cost was a deterrent to those students.

Findings

The presentation of findings of this report is typical of qualitative studies. In this project, themes that emerged through the transcripts are to some extent a product of the interview protocol, and the grouping of the following sections reflects that. More importantly, comments from participants are often reduced to a sentence or paragraph where possible, while in many instances quotations allow the participants to speak for themselves [block quotes in italics].

LIKES

Participants were asked what they "Liked Most" about the college. The bulk of the responses to the "Likes" question centered around instruction, with repeatedly complimentary comments about faculty voiced by every participant in every age group, and those comments reflected on personal interactions with faculty, faculty knowledge of subject matter, ability to convey that knowledge, and the ability to help students succeed. Other positive comments focused on institutional issues, class size, location and access to classes, course availability and relevance to goals or personal needs, and even the mix of students. Several asserted that they were energized by "starting something new." The following are examples of their comments.

Personal attention. A common measure for most of the participants was the ability to place a face with a name. "I liked the teachers. The professors got to know you by name.... if I wasn't in class one day and she saw me the next day she would be like you are going to be in class today."

Professional Expertise. While they acknowledged faculty who knew their students as persons, they also named faculty they considered exemplary. Comments praised knowledge of subject matter as well as the ability to motivate and enable student success. Even one participant (who assumed a role critical of faculty) narrated tales of exemplary faculty.

[He] had overheads that he brought in. He used examples as far as the material goes. Expanded on that material. Um. Really got you uh into sociology. And really knew his subject matter. Was very knowledgeable in um what do I want to

say? History and sociology. Just knew his subject matter. And knew how to present it.

Success.

[She] was wonderful. I mean I had no talent or anything in art, but she just you know like you can do it, and she just made you feel like you could do anything.

He was just tremendous. Just a great teacher. Actually knew what teaching was all about, and I don't find that very often, and uh I was really impressed. He obviously had skills as a teacher. (From the critic)

Flexible, able to adapt instruction and attitude to mixed groups. Students come to the classes from different backgrounds, representing mixed age demographics, some with more recent educational experience than others.

I had a wonderful instructor. She was wonderful. You would break into groups. There was such an age difference. And we were writing narrative and all kinds of things.

She is excellent. And I had almost all young people in that class. I think I was the oldest in that I was probably 40. I think I was the oldest. I had an excellent experience. I enjoyed very much. Every one was serious. Everyone took it serious. Mine had a lot to do with her. She made it a very interesting class, a very interesting class.

I thought all of the instructors that I had were very helpful. They took into consideration how long it's been since I've been in school. So they were you know very helpful in that aspect.
[Another responded] Yes. Incredibly. That's what I thought too.

Accessible.

I liked [name] for anatomy and physiology and that was fun. It wasn't a huge class so I [was] free to go up and ask questions and not feel stupid. It had been awhile since I had been in school

And they were there. If I needed help you know I went after class and she took her time and went through stuff with me. And it made me feel like I was um a person not just another student in the school.

Course relevance. For some, courses were steps taken toward a degree or diploma; for others courses represented new skills for their current job or a nugget in the search for a new career or personal interest. Most participants cited specific goals, even though some also had short-term goals generally within the timeframe of courses. Several applauded the variety of courses and their relevance to skills needed in

the workplace. Another commented on the personal growth that was value-added in her degree program.

Well just taking 2 classes I guess I took human nutrition first. I enjoyed that one more...That was with [name]. I enjoyed that a lot because that had a lot of things that I could use you know in real life because I was raising a child and...nutrition was something I guess I needed anyway even without going to school for nursing. But I just found it really helpful.

Class size. Class size at the college was viewed to offer a number of advantages, and in some cases makes up for other possible drawbacks. For classes at night, participants reported they avoided the "hustle and bustle" and that they felt more secure, "not so overwhelmed" as they might have at other institutions, whether they had attended other colleges or not. These other colleges included University of South Dakota, Morningside, Iowa State University, Wayne State University, and Briar Cliff. It was surprising that at least one participant thought classes at Morningside too large.

I liked the smaller classes at night. The mix of ages. I didn't feel so intimidated because there were more people my age. But yet I loved the younger people too. They were just it was different than the Morningside experience was.

Other support. Mentioned less frequently were admissions and enrollments ("easier than 4 year universities"), the scheduling, especially for students who were working full-time and taking evening classes, and general atmospherics which "nurture" older students. This is what we would expect, given student responses of what they hold important (Student Satisfaction Inventory). Students who came to the college from other cultures or ethnic groups also reported fitting in.

I just never went to any other school here in the United States. And I went both mornings and nights and I liked both. I mean I tried it at mornings. But then I changed my job so I had to go at night.

Well basically yeah except for maybe the first couple of years of my college I've been a non-traditional student most of the way, and I felt lucky that I felt like I fitted in with all of the people there regardless of what their age was from 17-18 through up to my age which is now up there. When I graduated from WIT I graduated at 53. I never felt an age differential. And I felt I was lucky. And the course I chose were the ones I wanted. I had excellent instructors, I think, all the way through. (This might have been a response to negative comments from some of the participants).

Location and Access. Most of the participants were from the metropolitan area. The evening schedule makes it possible for some students to enroll and access is also complemented by classes at rural campuses and classes offered on ICN or the Internet.

For it me it was a pretty obvious choice for me. You know what I was looking for was a night time being able to go to night classes. Centrally located. You can't beat it. It was just a perfect fit for me. So I didn't even look elsewhere. It was what I needed at that time.

I did feel like I was going in the daytime. And I did feel like I was kind of in a high school type thing. Because the kids were all so young. But I really enjoyed it. Yeah. But I really [liked] just the school atmosphere, and the idea of starting something that I knew I was excited about. Just like a fresh start thing.

I think another positive is if you want to take classes and you are stuck where I am out in the middle of nowhere um. You have quite a bit of choices on where you can go to school. I mean you've got Sioux City. You've got Cherokee. You have Denison.

DISLIKES

Most of the comments reflected attitudes and experiences toward specific faculty practices, lack of quiet study spaces, student attitude, and unresponsive staff.

Quiet Study. Several participants expressed concerns about noise when classes were scheduled in rooms adjacent to the gym and about disruption in class from cell phones. "*Their phone rings. That happens. That would happen a lot.*" More frequently they asked for quiet study areas and complained about noise levels when trying to study in the library. Participants typically recalled that "*a couple of years ago. The library and the computers were all together where I was trying to study, and people at the computers were back and forth.*" Another added, "*So I guess um what I would change is that they try to make the library quieter.*" Another participant joined with an amen. "*I hear you. I need complete silence too.*" Most were unaware that there has been a recently remodeled quiet area in the library.

Serious Attitude. In one group several participants objected to the attitudes and behaviors of other students. On the one hand, they expected to spend most of their time in class, not on break.

You know when you work all day and you don't get a break they expect to get a break after 45 minutes of actual class. I mean come on...You can't sit there for 3 hours without having a break. I mean something is wrong.

You know maybe that is one of the differences. It's just that you know we are doing this on a part time thing after [work] hours, after our main structured issues, and we are [ready to go].

Conflicting Student Attitudes. Similarly, though participants liked being with younger students, they suggested a need for "more seriousness" and expressed differences with the apparent lack of interest in learning but the overemphasis on grades in younger students. Representative comments include:

[T]here is only so much limited time that as a working adult can take, and you go in class and they don't show up, or they are disruptive.

I think that is one of those issues between and this is just personal but I think that is one of those examples that I was talking about the difference between dealing with students that are 20 years old and adults.

"I'm not even sure if I can define what I mean by saying I'm not sure that [Western Iowa Tech] is designed for adults. You know one of the things that I noticed is like you [to another participant]. I mean I tell you I never saw such a group of kids worried [that they had that 4.0 average]. I mean they didn't care what they learned."

"I wish it was, you know, it was more geared towards the more non-traditional students, especially the daytime, because I did feel like...I felt like I was in high school. You know. You do the attendance. And you had to do this. You know. I just feel like I don't need to do that. I'm here to learn. I don't know, I just like like at Morningside it was more traditional type. I mean non-traditional students.

Faculty Concerns. It bears repeating that in response to the "Likes" question, participants gave the faculty high marks. On the other hand, the "Dislikes" question provoked some harsh responses. Several participants described some faculty as not well prepared, citing examples of "not teaching anything" or "just reading out of a book" where "every line in the book had an equal amount of weight as any other one." Those enrolled in classes for short-term goals (specific computer or computer network skills, for example) or for personal development (not a degree) were the most critical.

I mean the money I spent for [the class] was worthless.... I guarantee you there is not another student in that class that got [sic] schmut out of it, and as an employer in this town if I turned around and hired one of those kids based on the concept that they had gone to WIT and had learned these skills and I wanted them to set up a network for me uh and the kid looked at me and said, well you know...That ... class I took was a joke. The best student that he had prior to the previous term and taken it 3 times and hadn't passed it yet.

So my question is you know especially on those level of classes are you doing your self any favors just by passing these kids through. Yes you are getting

their money. But if I'm you know a business person in this town…You are going to other people in my business are going to hear that, and I'm going to question you on other levels. Not just on that class that I had experience with.

Grading Practices, in which grades appeared to be based on attendance, were questioned by several participants.

"At the end of that class one of the things that upset me and I went - - - we were graded on our times we showed up. (Laughter). We were graded on how many nights we attended class. So because I had 2 programs where my children to go to their Christmas concerts. I missed 2 nights therefore it dropped my grade down automatically to a B."

The laughter was apparently ironic; that is, in responding to the "Dislikes" question, several participants described situations where "the teacher just slept in" on more than one occasion. In another group, a participant in an evening class told how "it was a snowy night out and it was really crappy and almost everybody made it. The teacher never showed up. Not a word. Nothing." Another mirrored that with "a similar incident but not because of weather but just because we got off track of the syllabus. So it pushed us back a couple of weeks…you know the teacher wasn't there." In the case of the participant who missed two classes and received a 'B,' the faculty member forgot to attend the first class.

Finally, one participant questioned the college's use of the faculty/course evaluation process, citing an instance where an adjunct faculty member (at a rural campus) continues to teach in spite of complaints on evaluation forms of sexual harassment:

I think he had something against women, because there was a lot of sexual har…, sexual comments made in class. And I cannot believe that he's been teaching there for 6 years going on the 7th. And past classes have not you know at the end of class you write out your evaluations. And I know on my last one I wrote comments about what he had said.

Unresponsive Staff. Participants expressed some "dislikes" for deficiencies in customer service, described in terms of stonewalled response to complaints about instruction, failure to provide response or closures on requests for evaluation and action on past credits, including credits earned at the college when a participant completed a program under the quarter system, and CLEP credits. One participant had asked if CLEP credits could be used before they were out of date, checked several times without getting a response, and finally said, "You just get to the point…I don't care."

I was thinking about taking an online course this spring semester, but when I talked to the (what do you call them…advisor) they weren't knowledgeable in what the on-line course was. I wanted to find out, you know: How do they test? What do you have to do? What are you know PC requirements? You know how do

they actually go about doing the on-line course? Pretty much all of the advisors weren't, didn't know anything about it.

'I've been to three what you call counselors out there to get a question answered. And I still don't have my question answered. And I would like to know the answer to my question. Years ago when I took the 9 month course it was a different kind of credit hours than they use now, but I'm going for my associate degree...Can I use any of those credits towards my associates degree? [They said] you better take all of the courses...I said well ok. Then if I can't use them, take them off my GPA, because I said you are using them...you are using those credit hours [to calculate] my GPA.'

Several described experiences similar to the above, another participant was more successful:

"I was transferring in hours from the archives of the 60's, so they worked with me pretty good, but you do have to stay on them, and call them and remind them a couple or three times. Because they had to take it before a board or something like that to get the hours transferred. And she sat down with me and said, 'Well if you take this, then we can do this.'"

One participant recounted her "side" of an 'incident' where her son was enrolled as a first time student and apparently experienced some difficulty.

He was all signed up and ready to go. And I don't know what. He had a problem made a big problem for himself. So we went to talk to the lady and go talk to the teachers. Well she just put him down. And made him so humiliated that he just said 'I'm not going to do it.' And I just...you didn't really have to do that. You didn't have to humiliate him. And I was right there.

But you know I've been in business for 20 years. I've provided customer service for 20 years and I really hate the concept that we make people shout before we will pay any attention to them... You know in my case... there is a lot of places I can go get classes. You know[WITCC] doesn't have to be one of them.

CHANGES

Changes suggested focused mostly on individual needs. Mothers with small children would like the college to offer childcare, though a father with a newborn thought the college should not be involved with childcare.

Students who were trying balance a busy schedule questioned why some courses for 4 credits are offered on two nights instead of one, "Two nights a weeks for 4? That's just too much." And though some did not want as many breaks in their 3-hour evening classes, another participant wanted the college to "shorten the length of classes. You know it probably works out to go one night a week for a lot of people, but for me to sit there for 3 hours is hard to do."

Level of Information. Several wanted swift, clear responses to questions about previous credit. Others asked that the teacher's name be published with courses that are advertised, "because when I [take] that course I'm going to look for that instructor's name." Several asked the college to be more "descriptive in their course catalog, because there is one class I was thinking about taking, but I don't know if [it is] preliminary [or if] they go into detail on it.

One participant thought the college should be "geared more towards the more non-traditional students, especially the day time, because I did feel like…I was in high school." Another suggested that the presentations, cultural events be videotape and replayed on local cable, noting that several times he would have liked to attend, but could not.

The most commonly expressed change, coming from participants in several of the groups, would be a more consistent and practical use of faculty evaluations. This was consistent with their concerns that not all classes used evaluation forms, that some faculty seemed not to improve where the students thought they should, and in rare instances, where the faculty continued to teach where students thought they should not.

> *Obviously from my point of view I wish there was something that allowed you to perhaps have a little closer check with your teachers. So that you knew what they were. As I said you've got some excellent ones. And I will bet you don't even realize that one is that good.*

Future Plans

1. Most of the participants who expressed an interest in continuing their education, working toward some sort of a degree, temper that with the realistic grounding of their own life situations. The question (In general, how likely would you be to return to Western Iowa Tech for classes – very, somewhat or not at all?
2. Why do you say that? (In general, how likely would you be to return to Western Iowa Tech for classes – very, somewhat or not at all?) was measured along a scale, with responses ranging from very likely to not at all. Because focus groups are conversational, they often added more. Generally they would like to enroll again in classes.

The most common response was "Very likely. Very, very likely," and if their long-range plan included a degree, "Most likely. I will finish up."

Their qualified answers are grouped into these categories:

Course fit with degree or personal plans.

Even for those working on a specific degree, the combined pressures of balancing a class with a job, care of family members, personal needs, meant that they would only take courses that fulfill requirements, "anything available within the course structure that I needed….I can't see just taking something for the heck of it. Right now when you are trying to work on [an] associates degree."

Course scheduling. Several had taken classes online or through IPT and found those helpful because they were able to fit those into their schedule. In addition to regularly scheduled classes, they would actively consider "an online course."

Resolving registration issues. In several instances participants did not want to 'retake' courses already completed at other colleges or at WITCC, and they were attempting to negotiate acceptance or transfer of other credit.

Competing family or personal interests.

Family and personal issues presented the most serious challenges for young mothers. This was evident for one participant enrolled in a nursing program, who puzzled about how to balance caring for two young children, finding enough money, and completing clinical requirements. Another reported that her son will start kindergarten next year, "which will help me with the child care problem."

This statement, then, seems to typify this concern:

I don't want to be where I am at right now for the rest of my life. I'm 22 years old [a single mom] I'm doing very well, a lot better than most people I know. But it is not enough for me. You know I do plan on furthering my education to get a better life for me and my daughter, but right now she comes before everything. I do eventually plan on...and no matter how long it takes I'm going to do what I want to do. I'm not going to sell my dreams. Eventually I will make it there. But I'm content. I'm not satisfied but I'm content right now.

Another participant balanced several jobs and community participation with classes.

Well I'm working towards my associates degree in business administration, and I am going to start up again in the fall. I took a year off for personal reasons. Life doesn't come to a halt. But school sometimes has to

Finances. Financial considerations figured prominently in the decision to enroll again in classes, without regard to the apparent socioeconomic status of the participants. One participant, for example, enrolled in classes originally because it somehow lowered the cost of a university education for his children.

The standing joke in our house is that my daughter and I will probably graduate roughly about the same time. But uh that is kind of how I got started back in school.

For others, cited throughout, reported a lack of finances for basic family needs. In some cases this meant hanging on to their jobs at least for the short term.

Just got to work out the money situation... I'm going to keep this job for one more year and then try to move on because I'm trying to get something normal, with normal hours.

Summary

Briefly, the 'Dropouts' in this study are nontraditional students, many of whom have an educational goal at the college; however, that goal is but one in a series of competing agendas.

When they think of the college, they focus on their classroom experiences and less so on support services unless those services do not make it go smoothly. Where there are long-term commitments to WITCC or past benefits, their attitudes toward the college are generally positive.

Their "Dislikes" are informative, reminding us at the very least that their expectation of exemplary customer service is a constant, and that their expectations for outstanding teaching has been tempered by their educational experience.

Though they made positive statements, respected the role and contribution of the community college to the community, we must remember that they were habitually taking only a few classes at a time, that they are not currently enrolled, and that they needed incentive to enroll. What they cited as "dislikes" might be identified as disincentives.

The findings are suggestive, not conclusive, a characteristic of exploratory research. In future studies we may want to refine our participant selection.

Appendix A
FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

I. Introduction.
Name. Work at Western Iowa Tech Community College.
Director, Institutional Research, who is also working on project.
We're here today to talk about your experiences at the college.
Participation. You were asked to participate in this group because each of you were registered in a fall semester in the past two years, but not in the Spring Semester.
We will audiotape this meeting to help us. This recording simply frees me from taking notes and acts as an aid in summarizing the information that is generated here.
What you say is confidential, and your remarks will by anonymous.
Human Subjects Form.

Room: Refreshments are over there, help yourself.
Rest Rooms are in the back, through those doors. Take a break if needed.

We expect this discussion to last about 2 hours.

The only procedure is that I want you to speak one at a time. I have a list of topics, but you may introduce some of your own, and these may be more helpful.

Let's go around the table and do some introductions. First Name. Which parking lot did you use.

3. Think back to the time when you were making your decision about enrolling for the first time. What were you doing then?
Schooling/training, work, family, goals, dreams?

4. Reason for enrolling.
What was the major reason you selected WIT?
Did you look at other colleges?
Why us, not them?
When did you decide, how long before enrolling?

5. Again at the time of your enrollment at WIT, what kind of courses did you take?
Did you have a particular objective in mind?
Full-time? Part-time? Hours.

6. During the semester that you were enrolled, what did you like most about the college? What was it that made that so good?

7. During that same time, what did you dislike the most about the college?
Why. What was it that made that so bad?

8. If you could have changed anything about WITCC, what would you change? What improvements would you suggest? Anything else?

9. You did not register for classes the following session.
   Why was that? What did you do instead?

   Life changes: Had any changes in your life occurred that might have contributed to your not returning to WITCC?
   Any changes at all in your work or family situation?
   Any changes in your aspirations?

10. What is it that **you are currently doing now** with regard to schooling or training or work? On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the best, how satisfied are you with your current situation?

11. In general, how likely would you be to return to Western Iowa Tech for classes – very, somewhat or not at all?
    Why do you say that?
    If at all likely to return, in what capacity and in what timeframe do you see that happening?

12. What is it that would prompt you to return to the college?

That's the end of my questions. I thank you for your time and your candor. Surely, they will help us make Western Iowa Tech an even better place to start.

Appendix B.

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Although the use of focus groups has recently increased in popularity, applications of the technique have evolved over the past 75 years. Perhaps the earliest use was by Bogardus (1926), who used the method in developing his social distance scale for detecting racial bias. From the qualitative data yielded by his groups, Bogardus constructed the scale that is the basis of much quantitative efforts even today. The way Bogardus used them, focus groups are fundamentally exploratory, that is, the source from which hypotheses are formulated and tested. Other approaches to the use of focus groups trace back to the 1930's when social scientists began investigating the use of non-directive individual, e.g., focused, interviewing as they questioned the results of and limitations of closed-ended questioning (Rogers, 1942, Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1938; cited in Krueger, 1994, 7).

Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956/90) provided the definitive work for focus groups in their classic The Focused Interview. It was (and continues to be) used across a number of disciplines, from journalism, history, anthropology, and psychology during the next 30 years. During this period, focus groups were adapted to marketing research for evaluating television advertising. Krueger (1994) cited as a recent application his own work in education at the University of Minnesota College of Agriculture. In general, the aim is to get in touch with the consumers, and to better understand how a decision making process or attitude formation process works.

The use of focus groups has expanded among social scientists in the past decade. Morgan (1996) reported that many academic researchers have used group interviews simply because they found it more convenient to interview several people at once. This reflects a widespread misconception that group interviews were an easy "shortcut" to data collection, a way to get more data faster than conducting several individual interviews. In such cases, the researcher is generally not interested in the unique characteristics of focus group interviews; in that context this method has not been given systematic attention (Morgan 1996).

Despite increased interest in focus groups among social scientists, researchers still see the need for "borrowing" and "innovation" (Morgan 1997) to adapt this marketing tool to academic research. In fact, while the majority of the literature on the use of focus groups comes from the field of marketing research, the widely accepted methods of applied marketing have not carried over to academic marketing research (Morgan 1996).

Unlike applied marketing researchers, who employ focus groups for both exploration and evaluation, academic users typically limit their use to exploration. The academic researcher who uses focus groups is interested in the kinds of data produced by in-depth interviews, as well as the process of negotiation among participants. The academic researcher must elicit and analyze group interaction using discourse analysis, the way language structures common sense beliefs (a level of analysis not found in applied marketing research).

Despite the greater complexity for academics, they increasingly view focus groups as a preferred research methodology. Turner et al. (1999) very recently used focus groups to study continuing inequities for professors in higher education. Ponterotto et al. (1998) used focus groups to pre-test the validity of their Teacher Multicultural Attitude Survey. Here, two groups of teachers completed the survey instrument and then discussed of the instrument and the respective items. The general response of the groups

was favorable, although each group made suggestions for minor word changes that subsequently were implemented.

In **How College Affects Students** Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) identified developmental influences of the college experience and the effect of that experience (the importance of students' informal interactions with peers and faculty) on retention. Students change substantially over the course of their undergraduate academic experience. Perhaps the most dramatic changes occur in their first year of college. Pascarella & Terenzini identified two types of theory: change theories and developmental theories. Change theories are defined as those that measure "alterations that occur over time in students' internal cognitive or affective characteristics" (Pascarella & Terenzini, p. 16). These theories also take into account the individual, the environment, and the interaction between these two facets. Some of the developmental theories that have been explored are psychological, addressing individual stages of personal development. Although these theories are useful, the "college-impact" models are more comprehensive and investigate the numerous variables that are presumed to influence student change. Within these models, student-related, structural, organizational, and environmental aspects to college life are considered.

Astin's (1993) update of a previous work, **What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited**, addressed the importance of student-student and student-faculty interactions. Astin and the student involvement theory are tightly coupled. For him, student outcomes are directly proportional to student involvement in college activities.

Astin (1984) examined retention from students' involvement perspective. He contended that students' involvement on campus contributed to persistence whereas lack of involvement was related to student attrition. According to Astin, involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. While evidence suggests that both students' integration and involvement are related to retention, researchers have found that a wide range of factors that influence students' decisions to stay in or leave higher education (Arnold, Mares, & Calkins, 1986; Astin, 1984; Moline 1987; Mohr, Eiche, & Sedlacek, 1998; Nora, 1987; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Some factors that have been found related to retention are students' previous academic performance, ethnic background, or socioeconomic status.

Frost (1991) proposed that retention can be improved when out-of-class and in-class learning experiences are integrated. He emphasized the importance of academic advising to help the especially the underprepared student experience success.

Hanson and Swann (1993) found that performance in the classroom was the most important variable in explaining student retention, college preparation was second, and participation in multiple student service retention programs was the third most important factor.

Li and Killian (1999) reviewed the interaction between academic and social integration in different educational contexts. Academic and social integration have a reciprocal relationship, and each form of integration can be a vehicle for integration in the other, but academic integration seems to be the more important form of involvement. In relation to community colleges, the respective roles academic and social involvement vary with different educational settings, with the clearest differences seem to arise between two- and four-year institutions.

Tinto (1975, 1993), building upon the work of Spady (1970), used the academic and social integration model to examine student retention. He argued that the more a student became integrated into the academic and social systems of a university, the more committed the student would be to the goal of college completion.

His review of the interaction between academic and social integration in different educational contexts is noteworthy. Academic and social integration have a reciprocal relationship, and each form of integration can be a vehicle for integration in the other, but **academic integration** seems to be the more important form of involvement. Furthermore, the respective roles academic and social involvement vary with different

educational settings, with the clearest differences seem to arise between two- and four-year institutions (an important consideration for community colleges).

> The more academically and socially involved individuals are--that is, the more they interact with other student and faculty--the more likely they are to persist... And the more they see those interactions as positive and themselves as integrated into the institution and as valued members of it (i.e., validated), the more likely it is that they will persist. (p. 168)

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1987) incorporates entering student variables like personal history, family characteristics, and academic skills and dispositions. He suggested that students' encounters at college of both the social and academic nature affect their decision to stay or leave the institution. That is, if students have positive or satisfying experiences within the institution, they will be integrated at both a personal and academic level and are more likely to remain a part of the institution. However, if these experiences are negative and unsatisfying, the individual will be distanced from the institution and possibly withdrawal or transfer. One potential problem with this model is the lack of organizational or structural characteristics of the college or university that could be influencing a student's withdrawal intentions.

Tinto (1996) lamented that the long-term impact of college retention programs had been surprisingly limited, and that most retention programs have done little to change the quality of *academic* experience for students, especially during the critical first year of college. He acknowledged the flurry of programs that accompany concerns about retention, including advising, tutoring and developmental education, peer mentoring, new residence hall arrangements, and the freshman seminar. Though he admitted that these may have improved the persistence rates, he cautioned that most report only modest gains, and only a few have had a major impact on persistence.

Tinto (1998) synthesized the research on student persistence into implications for organizational reform. His suggestions include: adopt a community model of academic organization that would promote involvement through the use of shared, connected learning experiences among its members, students and faculty alike; reorganize the first year of college (especially for 4-year institutions) as a distinct unit with its own underlying logic and pedagogical orientation; and reorganize faculty work to allow them, as well as their students, to cross the disciplinary and departmental borders that now divide them.

Tukey (1991) noted that although numerous researchers have based their investigations of student academic performance and retention on three models, solid academic predictions utilizing this information have eluded researchers for years. High school grades remain the best single predictor for academic performance at the college level. Moreover, although this factor is important, non-academic factors are also known to have a large impact on retention and achievement.

(Arnold, Mares, & Calkins, 1986; Moline 1987; Nora, 1987). Poor academic preparation and academic performance affected retention (Arnold, Mares, & Calkins, 1986; Moline 1987; Nora, 1987). In fact, withdrawal from higher education may be, in some cases, "involuntary" because of students' poor academic performance (Tinto, 1975). Personal concerns often contribute to students' decisions to leave college. Some of these personal concerns include marriage, family responsibilities, health problems, and accepting a new job (Arnold, Mares, & Calkins, 1986; Tinto, 1993).

Financial aid is a factor in students' persistence in higher education (Moline, 1987). Lack of adequate financial support often causes students' premature departure (Astin, 1975; Arnold, Mares, & Calkins, 1986; Mohr, Eiche, & Sedlacek, 1998). Though Tinto, (1986) found little evidence to support the contention that financial forces are paramount to individual retention decisions. Although **financial considerations** are important in

considerations to stay or withdraw from an institution of higher education, they are of secondary importance.

Among students of different ethnicity, non-minority students are more likely to graduate than African-American or Hispanic students (Arnold, Mares, & Calkins, 1986; Tinto, 1993). Additionally, Socioeconomic status of students is positively related (Tinto, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Grants had a small positive effect on persistence, but loans had a negative effect on persistence (Astin, 1975).

Rendon (1998) believed that nontraditional students a misunderstood segment of the American college student population. These are students who do not consider themselves college material, including a range of students who didn't make good grades in high school to those involved in gang life. The most important difference is that for the "traditional" student, college represents a continuation of family values and tradition, whereas for nontraditional students, it involves breaking away from those values and the difficult, sometimes contentious process of redefining family history. Nontraditional students must learn to operate in the academic world and at the same time in a very different their family world. Rendon emphasized the importance of "validation."

> *What made the critical difference for nontraditional students was what I call validation, when faculty, students, friends, parents, and spouses made an effort to acknowledge these students and what they were trying to achieve. Validation includes seemingly simple acts, like calling students by name, praising their work, and providing encouragement and support...And the more validations students experience, the richer their academic and social experience will be.*
>
> *The cynical among us believe that reaching out to help students only makes them weaker; this reflects cultural beliefs about power as the basis for a teaching-learning relationship. Many of us were forced to learn through intimidation, invalidation and fear; asking for help or getting help was a sign of weakness....There are still many faculty who practice this approach. (p. 3)*

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